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SUBJECT: INFERNO AT EGYPT'S SHURA COUNCIL

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a dramatic fire the evening of August 19, the 142-year old building housing the main hall, offices, and committee rooms of the Shura Council, Egypt's upper parliamentary house, was heavily damaged. The GOE has pledged to rapidly rebuild, and parliament, which is currently on recess, is expected to reconvene on-time in mid-November. A pervasive sense of schadenfreude has gripped the Egyptian public in response to the blaze, with no small number of Egyptians feeling that parliamentary fat cats, who recently passed a highly unpopular traffic law, have gotten what they deserved. End summary.

¶2. (U) Black smoke billowed over downtown Cairo for nine hours on August 19 as firemen, and then military helicopters called in to douse the flames with water from above, battled the blaze. Initial government statements ruled out any foul play in the incident, and on August 20 Interior Minister Habib al Adly told reporters that no "sabotage, subversive or terrorist acts" started the fire. According to press reports, faulty wiring or some similar electrical problem is the most likely cause. The Shura Council building, built by Khedive Ismail in the mid-19th century, was largely made of wood, so the fire spread quickly once it started. The building reportedly had no sprinkler system. One fireman died and 13 were injured while fighting the fire. The blaze reportedly heavily damaged the Shura Council's main hall, several parliamentary committee meeting rooms, as well as the official records of the parliament.

¶3. (U) Egypt's parliament is currently on recess, and not due to start its new session until mid-November. Speaker of the Shura Council Safwat el Sherif and People's Assembly Speaker Fathi Surour have both pledged that the new session will begin on time, and that reconstruction will begin immediately. PM Ahmed Nazif toured the damaged building on August 20, and said that a technical committee is being formed to investigate the cause of the fire, assess the extent of the damage, and provide recommendations for immediate rebuilding at government expense.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: A pervasive sense of schadenfreude has gripped the Egyptian public in response to the blaze. Even as the fire burned, we heard comments like, "it's too bad that the Shura wasn't in session, and all of those corrupt politicians went down with the building!" and "So the Shura burnt down - will anyone notice? It's not like that council does anything anyway!" According to contacts who were in the street watching the fire, the average reaction of passerbys was not shock and grief that such a historical building was destroyed, but rather a "serves them right" smirk. Some activist contacts told us they viewed the destruction of the Shura Council as a metaphor for the Egyptian state - "the institutions of the state itself are weak and easily destroyed, while it is the regime that is strong." Hamdeen Sabahi, an MP from a Nasserite party, told reporters that, "There is anger towards the regime and the feeling that officials deserve what happened." The Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary bloc, quick to capitalize on any opportunity to

criticize the government, released a statement noting
"disappointment at the careless handling of the crisis by
Egyptian authorities, despite the importance of the building
... (This highlights) the shameful carelessness of Egyptian
authorities and their weak crisis management abilities."
Egypt's emergency response services looked weak and
ineffective in their response to the fire, with the
widespread perception being that they did not know how to
properly respond, and that the military had to bail them out.
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